

THE TEN AND A BIT COMMANDMENTS

Imagine, if you will, that you are walking in the town centre when you bump into Rev. N. Naturally, you both pause to exhort each other, and, as you are engrossed in spiritual conversation, to your surprise, he casually draws from his pocket a packet of cigarettes. He offers you one, which you politely decline, and proceeds to light one for himself, from which he begins to take deep puffs as the conversation continues.

Stop for a moment, and close your eyes. Imagine what your reaction would be. Have you thought? Chances are, you are registering shock, horror and dismay. Now, can you think why you feel these things? Is it that cigarettes are bad for your health? Well, that's true, as I tell my patients all day long, but you wouldn't feel the same if you saw him take sugar in his coffee, which is known to decay teeth and clog the arteries.

Is it because tobacco is a drug, then, on which a Christian should not be dependent? Well, so is tea, which is why most of us are addicted to it.

Is it a waste of money, then, which could be better used on good works? Maybe, but look at the shopping in your mental shopping bag, and see how much of your expenditure is completely essential.

Economists among you might know that tobacco crops are grown in third world countries to the detriment of food crops, which impoverishes the people. A good argument against smoking, but also against tea, coffee, chocolate and many others.

What is it, then, that makes us so certain that a Christian, a pastor especially, should not smoke? The answer, my friends, is "cultural attitude". As simple as that: something we accept because we always have, without thinking about it, as a Christian teaching. I came across a good example of this at a home Bible study once. As is usual at these gatherings, the lady of the house was distributing cups of coffee, and somebody said, "If Christians in Holland saw this, they'd be shocked". It appears that in evangelical circles out there, coffee is regarded as an addictive, stimulant drug, which should certainly have no place in the study of God's word. Funnily enough, though, quite probably the men would all pull out their pipes, and fill the room with aromatic smoke as they interpreted the epistle.

The interesting thing is just how much of our church life is ruled by cultural attitudes. God gave us ten commandments – two vital ones. Somehow, we seem to do our best to add as many of our own as possible, on the Christian way to dress, the way to vote, the sort of music to listen to, and so on ad infinitum. Stop and think how many of your own attitudes are based on God's commandments, and how many on your background as a south-east English, middle class conservative evangelical, or whatever you may be. If any of your attitudes are not based on the commandments, and discourage anybody from a different background from becoming a Christian, then it's serious. Teaching as doctrine the precepts of men is something of which the Lord disapproves.

By the way, I don't think Rev. N. does smoke, so you can relax !

Jon Garvey.